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FROM A BOOK FUND COMMEMORATING  
RUTH GERALDINE ASHEN  
CLASS OF 1931

It's a sad thing  
when a man is to be so soon forgotten  
And the shining in his soul  
gone from the earth  
With no thing remaining;

And it's a sad thing  
when a man shall die  
And forget love  
which is the shiningness of life;

But it's a sadder thing  
that a man shall forget love  
And he not dead but walking in the field  
of a May morning  
And listening to the voice of the thrush.

—R.G.A., in *A Yearbook of  
Stanford Writing*, 1931

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THE DEATH  
OF  
ALEXANDER THE GREAT.

*NEWDIGATE PRIZE POEM, 1884.*

BY  
CECIL HENRY BOUTFLOWER,  
SCHOLAR OF CHRIST CHURCH.

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Oxford:  
A. THOMAS SHRIMPTON AND SON.  
LONDON: SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, AND CO.  
1884.

OXFORD: PRINTED FOR A. THOMAS SHRIMPTON AND SON,  
BY PARKER AND CO.

*Prince of Humilities, at whose dear feet  
These thoughts are laid in lowly dress,  
Of Pride cast down to overthrow complete,  
Greatness made nothingness,—  
O let no blighting whisper of that change  
Wherewith not Greatness' self may cope,  
Set down the strings of life to meaner range,  
Or bind the wings of Hope.  
Speak Thou of nobler faith, and make us see  
The pathless heights of things made possible in Thee.*





## The Death of Alexander the Great.

---

THERE be some themes not ready made to song,  
Whereon the bard must muse and ponder long,  
And work with words, and trick the dainty page  
With all fantastic phrases of the age,  
To make a poem where was none before ;  
And when the words are lost, the thought lives on no  
more.

But there are stories in the tale of time  
Almost too grandly great for paltry rhyme ;  
No lyric dream, but drama stern and high  
Writ with the iron pen of Destiny,  
Upon whose page God's own handwritings burn,  
And cry aloud on men to look, and learn.  
So when our childhood treads the old-world scene  
And plays among the graves of what hath been,  
Half-careless, by the hand of learning led  
To search the wreckage of the mighty dead ;  
There are some spots where even childhood's eyes  
Stand wide and wonder with a big surprise ;  
The figures are so large, the hues so bright,  
They linger long upon the spell-bound sight.

And still those scenes come back as years advance,  
 Clad in the colour and the circumstance  
 That our child-fancy gave them as it grew,  
 Untaught, untutored, and perchance untrue,  
 But fired by that one vision, broad, sublime,—  
 That image graven in the rock of time,  
 Stranger than fiction; aye, a wilder thing.

And thou wast such to me, great dying king.  
 Not for thy greatness, nor thy kingliness,  
 Nor dazzling pomp, nor noontide of success;  
 But Greatness when the great one comes to die  
 Is linked with something of humanity.  
 Oh then the chord of Tragedy rings deep,  
 Then wake the inmost heart-strings out of sleep  
 In yearning strange, whose sources none may tell  
 To hear the vast acclaim of startled hell  
 Stirred up to meet his coming—Can it be?  
 Art thou a man? Art thou become as we?

Oh, when thy last great triumph swept along,  
 When swelled and swelled again the pæan-song;  
 And through the lulls came chaunted with the wind  
 Blessings of grateful gods<sup>1</sup>;—Farspread behind  
 The sea of conquerors, and the conquered round  
 Shake the blue air, and garland all the ground  
 That undergroaned the tramlings of that car,  
 Where of Achilles' god-like line<sup>2</sup> the star

<sup>1</sup>. <sup>2</sup>. See notes at end.

Rode yet more god-like : where the incense fumes  
From silver altars curled about the plumes  
Of forty standards, that had learned to droop  
And blush in blood before the onward swoop  
Of Macedonia's eagle. On they came  
To rest a little on the heights of fame,  
To sheathe the Grecian steel in Eastern gold  
And view beneath the travelled distance, rolled  
In mists of blood and glory. See there wait  
About his chariot wheels, to call him great,  
Princes and peoples out of every clime,  
That bring the crowns of nations, spoils of time ;  
See how they throng about his feet to fall  
And hail him lord and king, the Great, the All in all.

Two moons have waxed, and two have waned upon  
The motley splendours of great Babylon,  
Its pomps and pageants, sacrifices, vows,  
High feast and revelling and wild carouse,—  
And this is Alexander ! He who lies  
Unrobed, ungarlanded, uncrowned. The eyes  
Are very weak and weary : speech has fled  
The lips that shattered kingdoms ; and the head  
A world had thronged to gaze on, listless lay  
And hid its heavings from the light of day.  
The chieftains one by one with fearful tread  
And sword ungirt had kneeled beside the bed,

And stooped to touch, and hardly knew the hand  
That oft had flashed on high the foremost brand.  
And now they too were gone ; an anxious few,  
The tried and trusted, watched the long hours through  
That brought the crisis : waiting on the brink,—  
Waiting—they knew not what, nor cared to think.

Without the evening lingered. Far and wide  
The towering city brooded o'er the tide  
That swept her palaces,—then flashed between  
White walls, dark-fringing palms, or pastures green,  
To yon grim sky-line clasping in its girth  
The heart of all the glories of the earth.  
Solemnly grand and peaceful all around  
Half-ruined walls and temples from the ground  
Spread upward to the skies again, and rose  
In soft majestic splendour of repose,  
Baffling a broad rich flood of lingering light ;  
The sudden stridings of the Eastern night  
Seemed to hang back reluctant, and to spare  
The unwonted glow that pondered wistful there.  
Mid golds and purples of the dying day  
One monster shadow o'er the palace lay,  
The Hanging Gardens of great Babylon  
That wandered up to watch the sinking sun,  
And still would tremble with a pale far glow  
While the blue night crawled round their feet below.

3. + See notes at end—

And he, the Great, was dying in the calm  
Of all that greatness. Each mysterious palm,  
Each careless-chattering fountain purred at will  
Unchecked, unhidden ; but all else was still  
With more than evening's stillness,—street and mart,  
The fevered pulses of that empire's heart.  
Where was the hum of men ? the roar, the cries,  
The hundred sounds that spake of enterprise,  
Of ruthless glory and of restless fame,  
Till all the welkin echo with his name,  
Till the last lordling from his throne be hurled,  
And Alexander fill the little world ?  
Hushed one by one ; and they that wrought them, wait,  
Thronging but silent, round the palace gate.

It seemed to rouse the king ; for once he turned—  
The eyes were anger-bright, the pale face burned,—  
And twice he strove to frame impatient words  
And ask of that dark omen from his lords,  
Was it a fear,—what fear?—had made them cease ?  
And twice he cursed that uncommanded peace.  
It seemed to tell him that the die was cast,  
The height was clambered now, the zenith past ;  
And in the silence, in the fading light,  
In the quick shadows of the coming night,  
In those knit brows that waited round his bed,  
In all the throbbings of a fevered head,

A voiceless certainty there seemed to rise,  
And MENE MENE gloomed before his eyes :  
There was no finger-writing on the wall,  
No prophet-form stood forth before them all,  
From whose unquestioned lips a king might hear  
The voice of judgment cry, ' Thy doom is near.'  
As in those self-same walls, not long ago  
One man majestic stood, and dared to know,  
And tell the meaning of their dark despair  
To king and lords bowed down before him there,—  
' The ruffling of the air before the wings  
Of Vengeance swooping from the King of kings.'  
Unknown, unthought of, while the feast ran high  
With crash of gold and shout of revelry ;  
Uncalled, uncared for by the sons of men,  
Until the darkness and the hand,—and then,—  
Then there was only one that had not sold  
The keys of wisdom for the greed of gold,  
One whose strong spirit no voluptuous mirth  
Had dragged from high communings to the earth.  
He stood a king mid all that band of slaves,  
Like heavenward rock about whose feet the waves  
Run wildly to and fro, distraught and pale,  
Leaping and tumbling from the crags they scale ;  
As if they knew that very far and high,  
Beyond the wreathing foam and mist, the sky  
Is calm and cloudless, and that yon rock-spire  
Stretches aloft and bathes in liquid fire ;

That somewhere round its brow the sunbeams play  
In the far azures of etherial day.

But now not so ; the dark was deeper far,—  
No grasp of God, no prophet-soul, no star  
In all that heathen night, whose lonely glow  
By its own solitude might serve to shew  
The darkness of the dark. A night was come,  
Whose shadows might be felt ; yet all was dumb ;  
Prophet or priest or seer, not one was there  
To read the hidden writings of despair,  
To pierce these clouds of doom before they burst,  
And kill poor struggling Hope, and tell the worst.  
And so a chilly silence brooded round,  
And nothing brake it, save the fearful sound  
Of one low step, that every now and then  
Parted the arras and drew back again ;  
And every time the leech would shake his head ;  
But still no sigh was heard, no word was said,  
And still the waiting eyes, the bated breath,  
Made doubly drear that presence-hall of Death.

Oh for the kindly spell of gentle tears  
To break that chain of thirty hardened years !  
Years when he sought to raise himself so high  
From all that bound him to humanity,  
That he had cut the heart strings too ; and now  
They could not weep for him, but only bow



In awful pity, such as I have known,  
To watch an Alpine crag, far-off, alone,  
Battered with mountain-wreckage, till it leap  
Down, down to ruin,—yet I could not weep.  
So wistful, round yon bed the servants stand  
Awe-bound, attent, to catch the least command ;  
There were quick hands, and ready eyes and ears,  
Honour, allegiance,—everything but tears.

Dear beauteous tears ! how freely, fondly, shed  
Round the old pillow, by the dying head,  
Where narrow hopes and lowly aims have reared  
A life too little to be greatly feared ;  
But not too little to be loved and blest,  
The first of all his kinsfolk and the best.  
Him hero-hearts shall follow to the grave,  
And hero-women, trying to be brave :  
Ah do not stay them, sacred, silent tears,  
That soothe the heart-ache, and that blind the fears.

Then a strange flush came darkening on his  
brow,  
And the lips quivered ; he was wandering now,—  
Wandering,—aye, far away and lost at last  
In the dim lurid cloudland of the past,  
Where every shape a fevered fancy drew  
Went by and melted into something new,

And memory's chequered visions all were rife  
With half the crowded pageant of his life.  
And now, the palace and the bed forgot,  
He seems to tread again the well-known spot,  
Where the great master<sup>r</sup> of the minds of men  
Spake of the soul's hereafter once again :  
And as he spake, himself sprang up and cried,  
He would be more than mortal ere he died,—  
So great that he would shake the spheres alone  
And bind reluctant Nature to his throne.  
Then ere the slow grave voice could make reply  
The scene had shifted, and he seemed to lie—  
Not yet immortal,—no, but grappling Death  
By the far Cydnus, and to fight for breath,  
And win, and rise emboldened from that bed  
To dash the beaten fevers from his head,  
And see his standards once again unfurled  
To hunt the remnants of unconquered world.  
And hark again ! the crash of stubborn walls,  
Where Tyre in thunder to the ocean falls :  
And Alexandria sea-born springs to be  
Fair presage of his immortality.  
Onward, and still no rest ; and once again  
He turns his march where only sky and plain,  
And sand and solitude, might seem to give  
That fiery spirit ampler space to live,  
And lead a host where seldom foot hath trod,  
To wring his secret from the lips of God.

<sup>r</sup> See note at end —

There in gaunt-swinging palm-shade, mid the cries  
Of wild weird priests, and fearsome mysteries,—  
A voice !—whose utterance shook that lonely shrine,  
And hailed him 'Son of Heaven,' of race divine.

'The Son of Heaven,'—and the well-won name  
Went ringing in his ears. But then there came  
Another memory that lingered on,  
And one he could not brook to think upon,  
And yet so vivid ! Under Syrian blue  
Another temple gleamed upon his view,  
And other priests, that slowly wended down  
Where yon fair walls the vale of Cedron crown :  
Stern and unbending came the white-robed band,  
They bare no sign, no symbol in their hand,  
But something in their look that uttered more,  
A thought of God he never dreamed before.  
So he looked on and wondered. There was given  
No salutation to the Son of Heaven ;  
None did obeisance ; yet he bowed his ear  
To learn their unsought message ; and a fear—  
A strange dim fear—came on him : he must fly,  
And lead his army back,—he knew not why.

It was so solemn, that it almost seems  
To stay the fever of delirious dreams,  
And bring the workings of that troubled brain  
A little moment to the earth again.

No, just a sigh : and then he hears the shout  
That turned the headlong battle into rout,  
And left a kingdom kingless at his feet.—  
So now, the tale of triumph half complete,  
He well might pause to pity, and to sigh  
As conquerors can, who see the conquered die.

Again the breath came slower, and the dream  
Passed out and widened to a shallow stream  
Of thought.—Darius dead ! The King was dead !  
Why then kings die !—most kings—

But flatterers said  
That he was not as others, but should soar  
To be among the stars for evermore :  
Seeing no heaven might deny his worth  
Who had so devastated God's fair earth ;  
Him glories waited on beyond all ken ;—  
Yet,—he who oft had felt like other men,  
Felt, ah, so like them now ! Oh who could tell ?  
Hell must be vast ! Are there not kings in Hell ?—  
And he the great, the god, the world-enthroned,—  
He writhed, and shook the purple coverlet, and groaned.

Upon the great abyss ! His eyes unclose  
One short last moment ; and he sees,—he knows,  
That he is there : with all the unreal past  
Quick-fleeting into nothingness at last.

Oh spare him God ! He has so far to fall ;  
The almost nothing,—not the All in all ! \* \* \*

Aye, better so : better again to rave,  
Than feel the foothold crumbling by a grave  
So deep and awful, and to clutch in vain  
For something real. Better that again  
The lurid flash of half-rekindled sense  
Burns him to madness and fond impotence.  
And once again in headlong course he seems  
To roam the vasty shadowland of dreams,  
Half-fancied, half-remembered. So the flame  
Went flickering on, till One more mighty came,—  
Came near and laid his hand upon the brow,—  
And all was quiet ; life was over now.  
So the poor trembling lips were still at last,  
And the flush died away and all was past,—  
The agony of thought, the wild distress,—  
And the last look was only emptiness.

Poor pitiful ending !

All the day is gone,  
And a big summer moon creeps out and on  
Up the cool silence of an Eastern sky.  
In such a night a little child might die,  
About whose bed soft angel-footsteps trod  
To bear its gentle spirit back to God.

The great sky should have thundered, and the  
night  
Been torn with angry bolts, in whose red light  
Unearthly forms, wild spirit-shapes should brood  
And shriek the travails of a hell subdued,  
And ampler heavens groaning in the thrall  
Of him for whom this earth was all too small.  
Yet the star-sprinkled river glints along,  
No minor in her waters' undersong ;  
And still the solemn moon rolls on o'erhead,  
And the dew falls, until the night be sped ;  
Till sunrise laughs along the rippled tide,  
As if no king of all the earth had died.

\* \* \* \*

Ask thou not further ; how the joyous lands  
Leaped up and shook away their shivered bands :  
How a great gladness took the cowering Earth,  
For whom her tyrant's death was Freedom's birth :  
How she brake forth to singing, and how Peace  
Came from her hiding-place, to breathe release.  
Irony whispers 'This is Greatness' prize,  
That Earth keeps holiday, when Greatness dies ;  
When from her terror she awakes to share  
The wild glad freedom of her mountain air.'—  
Ask not of this ; lest sick at heart thou say  
'There is no Greatness ; only death, decay.'

Is there no Greatness? Every vanished year  
Sighs back across the past 'It is not here :'  
'Not here' the echo comes from those old days  
When Force was Greatness, and the greatest praise  
Was to the strongest ; when the world adored  
An iron idol, worshipped with the sword.  
And now the age of Force has passed away,  
Nor yet are we the better in our day ;  
In this our Knowledge-age, when hope is old,  
The iron idol is but changed to gold :  
We seek eternal greatness by long pain,  
In waxing wealth and wisdom. All in vain :  
Still through the city-roar there haunts the ear  
The old world-weary cry, 'Not here ; not here.'  
The trophy-kingdom rots, the stone is dust,  
The parchments crumble, and the brasses rust ;  
And all the greatness human-nature owns,  
Lasts but a little longer than the bones.

Is there no Greatness? From the void within  
The hungry cry returns : and through the din  
Of all false answers, hear the still small voice,  
That breaks the idols of all ages' choice ;  
That tells thæe Greatness is a something more  
Than all the earth hath dreamed of heretofore,—  
'Not here, nor there, but in a self forgot,  
Greatness is found of them that seek her not.'



## NOTES.

PAGE 6.

<sup>1</sup> *Blessings of grateful gods—*

Alexander had conciliated the people by rebuilding the temples of Belus and other deities in Babylon.

PAGE 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Where of Achilles' god-like line the star—*

Alexander claimed descent from Achilles on his mother's side.

PAGE 8.

<sup>3</sup> *To yon grim sky-line—*

The accounts of the two eye-witnesses, Herodotus and Statius, of the walls of Babylon are almost incredible: that they were at least 300 feet high, and 42 miles in circumference.

PAGE 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Half-ruined walls and temples—*

Alexander had begun to rebuild the temples and walls which had been partially destroyed by Cyrus.

PAGE 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Where the great master—*

"The mind of the great conqueror was specially influenced by the greatest conqueror in the world of thought."



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